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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000486

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD, EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: AS ELECTIONS APPROACH, BROADCAST MEDIA BECOME
FREER...FOR NOW

REF: A. YEREVAN 1075

[1](#)B. YEREVAN 1646

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Classified By: IO Liz Zentos for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) As Armenia's May 12 parliamentary elections approach, Armenian broadcast media have begun giving more air time to opposition figures. While opposition politicians had previously complained about unequal access to the broadcast media and presidential control of television stations (ref A), a number of opposition leaders have recently remarked that the broadcast media's political coverage has become more impartial. The president's office has been making a concerted attempt to prove that opposition politicians receive broadcast time, sending Post DVDs with coverage of opposition figures and posting a report on the MFA website that lists how many times certain opposition figures were seen on television. Some analysts argue, however, that the broadcast media's new-found "freedom" will end once international media monitors depart following the elections. End summary.

OPPOSITION FIGURES GET ACCESS TO TELEVISION...

[1](#)2. (SBU) We have noticed a marked increase in the prominence given to opposition politicians during prime time news broadcasts. On April 8, for example, the first official day of campaign season, news programs reported on rallies held by both opposition and ruling coalition figures.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In addition to being seen more frequently on the news, opposition politicians have also been interviewed by television stations. While some "safe" oppositionists who were not seen as a threat had been interviewed in the past, opposition figures who had claimed to be "black listed" from air time by the GOAM are now also being seen. Opposition Heritage Party leader Raffi Hovhannisian, who had earlier complained he had not been interviewed on television for over a year, has been interviewed on three different television stations since March 29. New Times Party leader Aram Karapetian, who claimed not to have received air time since April 2005 (ref B), was shown on a number of television stations debating another opposition politician on April 13. In addition, opposition Orinats Yerkir leader Artur

Baghdasarian, who announced that the GOAM had prohibited stations from airing interviews with him, has been seen on television a number of times, including an interview program on government-run Public TV.

...AND ACKNOWLEDGE AN OPENING UP OF THE BROADCAST MEDIA

14. (C) A number of opposition leaders have publicly acknowledged that they have seen a change in television stations' coverage. According to Azg newspaper, at a press conference on April 13, Artur Baghdasarian said that, recently, he has not had any complaints about television stations' pre-election coverage. In addition, newspapers report that during an April 16 press conference, opposition People's Party leader Stepan Demirchian praised the media for their work during the pre-election period. At an April 11 reception, Raffi Hovhannisian told us that he had seen a positive change in how the broadcast media were covering his campaign events.

PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON MAKES PUSH TO SHOW TV PLURALITY

15. (SBU) Presidential Spokesperson Victor Soghomonian has been involved in attempting to show that opposition parties are getting coverage. In July 2006, Soghomonian sent official letters to the OSCE representative on freedom of the media and the head of the "Ago" monitoring group of the COE Council of Ministers refuting claims that opposition politicians are not provided equal access to airtime. The letters, which Soghomonian forwarded to the U.S. Embassy, included a list of opposition politicians who had recently received air time. In addition, between August, 2006 and March, 2007, Soghomonian sent Post three sets of DVDs with

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television coverage of opposition politicians. In a March 10 interview with Hayots Ashkhar newspaper, Soghomonian stated that the president's office had monitored television coverage of opposition figures since April 1, 2006, and said, "Those who talk about the suppression of freedom of speech in Armenia can look at the results of the monitoring." The MFA also posted a summary of this "monitoring" project, which lists how often certain opposition politicians were seen on television, on its website. (COMMENT: Prior to the last few weeks, Soghomonian's examples, on closer scrutiny, were mostly thin gruel. The cited instances comprised mainly insignificant, tame, or essentially pro-governmental "independent" political figures. In the last few weeks, however, we see the "real" opposition getting on the air, and during high-audience timeslots. END COMMENT).

BUT WILL IT LAST?

16. (SBU) While media analysts have noted an opening up of the broadcast media, some have also questioned whether stations will go back to their old ways after the May 12 elections, when Armenia is no longer under the scrutiny of international election observers and media monitors. At a meeting with representatives from the OSCE Election Observation Mission, Yerevan Press Club (YPC) President Boris Navasardian noted that his organization's media monitoring project had found that there has been a notable improvement in the impartiality of television stations' coverage of opposition politicians. However, Navasardian commented that, while in previous years, television stations were relatively free for eight months and were controlled for two months during the campaign season, now it appears that the opposite is occurring--stations do not air opposition figures for eight months of the year, but broadcast oppositions for two months while international observers are watching.

COMMENT

17. (C) Whether motivated by democratic ideals, outside pressures for free and fair elections, or the belief that most opposition candidates pose little threat to the governing coalition, this newfound flowering of media access for opposition figures is a very welcome development. While it is clear that the GOAM has undertaken a concerted effort to show that Armenian broadcast media are open to all political parties, the fact remains that the media climate now seems better for this campaign period than we might have predicted. We are impressed by the OSCE EOM's robust media monitoring methodology, and look forward to EOM's eventual report, which will document the campaign period media climate more comprehensively. It remains to be seen, however, whether this more level media playing field will last after the EOM packs up and goes home.
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